

5000 West



Vol. 2, No. 10

For employees, volunteers and patients of Zablocki and our community clinics

November/December 2011



An artist for Summit Smith provided this conceptual drawing of the future Milo C. Huempfer Green Bay Clinic, which is scheduled to open in 2013.

BY GARY J. KUNICH
5000 West editor

One shovel full of dirt for man ... one giant construction project for mankind ...

Perhaps that might be a bit lofty of a description for the dirt field in the 2800 block of University Avenue in Green Bay that will one day be the new Milo C. Huempfer mega-Community Based Outpatient Clinic, but it will be rather significant for the 20,000 veterans who live in and around the area.

After years of planning and some unforeseen delays, the Department of Veterans Affairs took the next critical step

forward in building the clinic with the official Oct. 20 groundbreaking.

The goal was to break ground as soon as possible so work can progress throughout the winter, and the clinic will open in 2013.

"We are ecstatic to move forward with this construction, so we can continue to deliver the world-class care that veterans have earned and deserve," said Robert Beller, the Milwaukee VA Medical Center director, which will provide oversight for the clinic, once it is complete.

Summit Smith, which specializes in building healthcare facilities, will own

the building and the 27 acres of land it is built on. That company will lease it to the VA for a 20-year period at a cost of \$5.6 million a year.

Operating under a lease allows the VA to continue to plan ahead and offer targeted services where veterans live.

Once complete, the two-story Green Bay clinic will have 161,525 square feet and 1,200 parking spaces. It will include ambulatory surgery, a specialty clinic, women's clinic, cardiology, mental health department and diagnostic imaging.

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See Green Bay

In Briefs

Donate excess leave

Employees in "use or lose" leave status are reminded they can donate hours to the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program. This allows employees to donate annual leave to coworkers who are experiencing a medical emergency.

Employees may donate to a specific person, or divide their donation among multiple recipients.

Most employees are allowed to carry over 240 hours of annual leave from one year to the next. Full-time nurses and physician assistants may not carry forward more than 685 hours of annual leave; and full-time physicians and dentists may not carry forward more than 86 days of annual leave. Any annual leave in excess of the carry-over amounts will automatically be deleted after Dec. 31.

For more information, call Bonnie Lofgren at 414-384-2000, ext. 42939, or Kay Schwieger at ext. 42928.

Holiday Coffee House Dec. 19

The holiday Recovery Coffee House takes place 6:30 to 9 p.m. Dec. 19 in Recreation Hall, Room 3435. It is free and open to the public. It will include a performance by the VA Jam Band.

Anyone wishing to participate must sign up by Dec. 12.

The Coffee House is open to all veterans wishing to showcase their talents. Previous acts have included songs, poetry, magic and music performances.

For more information on the event, call Sandy Rice at 414-384-2000, ext. 41673, or Shep Crumrine at ext. 42433.

Milwaukee symphony performs

The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra will perform a free, holiday concert for veterans and employees, 1 p.m. Dec. 16 in Recreation Hall, Room 3435, as part of their hometown holiday tour.

Any staff who would like to help bring veterans from the Community Living Center or Spinal Cord Injury, should contact the units.

For more information, call Sandi McCormick at 414-384-2000, ext. 41988.

Donations needed for Christmas for Vets

Donations are needed for the 23rd annual Christmas for Hospitalized Veterans, organized by Jeff Dentice.

The event takes place Dec. 10.

Organizers are still hoping to collect baked goods, hygiene items, jackets, DVDs and more, which will be given to the veterans.

For more information, call Dentice at 414-218-3030.



Photo by Gary Kunich

"I pledge allegiance ..."

Lucas Berndsen, 4, and Denise Jashinsky, chief of Voluntary Services, leads a capacity crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance at the Nov. 11 Veterans Day ceremony in the chapel. Lucas is the grandson of Mary Jo Jankovic, who also works in Voluntary Services.



5000 West is a recurring publication produced by the Public Affairs Office and Medical Media of the Zablocki VA Medical Center, and is intended for employees, volunteers, patients and

friends. Views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the medical center. While 5000 West encourages submissions for future editions, we cannot guarantee publication, and reserve the right to edit all copy so it conforms to editorial policy and guidelines. To submit information, e-mail: Gary.Kunich@va.gov, or call the Public Affairs Office at 414-384-2000, ext. 45363.

Robert Beller
Medical Center Director

Editor — Gary J. Kunich
Copy editor — Christa Holland
Staff writer — Brian Walker

Green Bay

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"It will offer everything short of overnight stays. If you ask the veterans they'll tell you it's something they've wanted and is long overdue. It's something we want too, and we're very excited," said Karen Karch, who is currently the clinic manager.

The current Green Bay clinic is only about 7,000 square feet and serves 3,500 patients a year. The new clinic will be able to serve nearly 20,000 Veterans.

"The current facility just isn't meeting all the demands, so this is going to be huge," Karch said. "Right now, many of the Veterans in the area have to travel to Milwaukee for their care, or see physicians in the local community. A lot of them don't want to travel. Plus, if we're taking care of them for all of their needs it allows for better continuity of care, so we can better help them with all of their healthcare needs."



Photo by Amanda Domaszek Urrea

VA and elected officials, as well as Summit Smith, joined forces with Jacki Schneider and Wayne Huempfner (far right), family members of Milo C. Huempfner, to take the first ceremonial pitch of dirt to mark the groundbreaking.

Help wanted: Veterans to help create medical advances of the future

Million Veteran Program largest genome study of its kind

BY GARY J. KUNICH
5000 West editor

The Milwaukee VA is seeking veteran volunteers to participate in an ambitious, one-of-a-kind, genomic program that will allow research into numerous illnesses and lead to advances in healthcare.

The VA's Million Veteran Program plans to enroll one million volunteers from across the nation for the largest genome study of its kind. Milwaukee is one of 31 VA Medical Centers now enrolling veterans. The hospital hopes to enroll 25,000 veterans.

Officials said the program will identify gene-health connections, and could advance disease screening, diagnosis, and prognosis and point the way toward more effective, personalized therapies.

Dr. Robert A. Petzel, VA's Under Secretary for Health, said the program, run by the Veterans Affairs Research and Development Program, will help researchers, "learn more about how genes affect health, and thus, transform health

care for veterans and for all Americans."

Dr. Jeff Whittle, director of health services research from the Milwaukee VA, will conduct the portion of the study at the here.

"Basically, it's going to teach us how to give personalized medicine to vets," he said. "It will help identify genes that influence how the body reacts to drugs. It will identify genes that tell us why some people have diseases and others do not.

"As an example, we know lung cancer and cigarette smoking is linked, but a vast majority of people who do smoke, don't get lung cancer. This might help us find out why. We know very little about pancreatic cancer. If we can figure out the genes and the prediction rules, we can advise on lifestyle changes. It may help lead to changes in treatment for cancer and numerous other diseases, and help us focus our efforts on our patients," he added.

Those who wish to participate will be asked for a blood sample and to fill out a health survey. Participation also includes allowing approved researchers secure access to medical records and agreeing to future contact by the MVP staff.

The Million Veteran Program will consolidate genetic, military exposure, health, and lifestyle information together in one single database. The secure database will be used only by authorized researchers in the VA, other federal health

agencies, and academic institutions within the United States.

Patient safety and information security are the top priorities in the program. To protect confidentiality, blood samples containing genetic material and health information collected for MVP will be stored in a secure manner and labeled with a barcode instead of personal information. The researchers who are approved to access samples and data will not receive the name, address, social security number or date of birth of participating veterans.

The program has been developed in close coordination with the VA Genomic Medicine Program Advisory Committee — comprised of private and public health, scientific, and legal experts in the field of genetics, as well as veteran representatives.

The aim of the program is to not come up with immediate answers, but to stockpile information that could answer a number of research questions and lead to new treatments down the road, Whittle said.

Currently, volunteers can call and schedule an appointment, or come in on a walk-in basis.

Those wishing to participate locally should call 1-866-441-6075 or visit the web site at www.research.va.gov/MVP for more information.

Work area coaches lead the way



Kayleen Wichlinski

Peas and Q's

you, loyal reader, involved in your area. Perhaps you can nominate someone as the coach in your department or even your home, and ask that person to set up weekly wellness opportunities. The effort required to set up such an undertaking must be done on one's own time, but if we encourage our veterans to "MOVE!" we must also support ourselves throughout this enterprise.

Milwaukee VA dietitians have worked diligently alongside our facility's employee wellness coach to move forward with the health benefits attached to Employee Wellness. As we move through the preliminary stages, the kitchen decided to practice some of these zany ideas during Foodservice Worker Week during the first week of October. Thus, Oct. 4 was declared Employee Wellness Day in the kitchen.

Here's what we did to celebrate the week. Feel free to borrow and use the same ideas for your own fitness projects!

Endeavor 1: The VA's Largest Line Dance. *Tools needed: CD player; CD with*

a line dance song or even the, "Electric Slide," and space for moving.

Within their 15-minute break, the food services workers, cooks, dietitians, administrative employees, and program manager — ages 25 to 70 — were dancing in the kitchen.

"It was excellent. We really enjoyed our exercise for the day -- it was just like Tae Bo," says Ramona Reed, food service worker from Nutrition and Food Services.

"Just make sure nobody falls," adds Cynthia Schneider, foodservice worker, noting that employees really grooved and jived.

Endeavor 2: Relaxed Breathing Exercises. *Tools needed: Television, DVD player, "Breathing Exercises" DVD from the VA Library or any individual willing to facilitate relaxed breathing, a quiet room.*

Another portion of the day was set aside to practice breathing exercises. Many studies show the health benefits related to conscious breathing with reduced stress and/or anxiety as the top listed. Employees were encouraged to participate in five-minute breathing exercises led by dietetic technician, Christine

Immel. Exercises included "Breathing to Reduce Stress" and "Breathing for Energy." Employees noted immediate improved vigor and overall well-being.

Endeavor 3: Promote Healthier Foods. *Tools needed: Popcorn machine (preferably air-popper), and a co-worker who enjoys showing off his or her popping mastery.*

The kitchen kept popcorn available to all of its employees during Employee Wellness Day to help employees understand the importance of whole grains and fiber. Some healthy bread made with applesauce, brownies made with black beans (Delicious!), or cut-up veggies and hummus might ignite healthy fumes in your area.

For additional recipes and ideas, please see the Dietitian's Blog, "Peas & Q's," located on the VA Intranet Homepage in the "Quick Links" tab.

Endeavor 4: Personal Employee Wellness Planner. *Tools needed: Creativity.*

The heart of the day was devoted to each individual's wellness goals. The kitchen created a unique and personalized Wellness Planner, where employees could circle any or all of their wellness targets and voice their overall wellness goal. Planners were put on display in the kitchen to remind employees on a daily basis of their goals and to keep motivation at an all-time high.

Employee Wellness is on the move. Get motivated. Get started. Get involved. Do not wait for the dietitians to start nutrition classes. Don't linger around the physical therapy department waiting for someone to initiate daily walking groups, just go for a walk! Employee Wellness starts with YOU. Together, we can create a healthier VA atmosphere — one step at a time.

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the know.

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BY CHRISTA HOLLAND
5000 West copy editor

Her face was plastered around hundreds of post offices throughout Germany, and not because of any crime she had committed. People would comment on how familiar she looked, yet they couldn't quite place her. At 21, she was more influential than most can imagine.

High above the Neckar River in her Heidelberg apartment, she'd look down on the gorgeous town square and see how crowded it was; yet she was thousands of miles from home and somewhat lonely; a kind of innocent prisoner.

For Elsa Tucker, administrative officer in the Rehabilitation, Extended and Community Care Division, the journey began through the Army ROTC at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

"It started as a way for me to pay for college, but became so much more," she said.

Before her four college years were complete, Elsa had already interned at the Pentagon and graduated from Airborne school.

After college graduation in 1998 and commissioning as a second lieutenant, she was stationed in Germany as platoon leader in the 510th Personnel Service Battalion, a 30-person postal department, including military and civilian employees. Her first assignment to Germany was her first — and hardest — extended period of time away from home.

"It was incredibly hard,"

"(The Army) taught me how quickly you can build a team, and really, a family with people who have a common goal, a passion to do what's right and a commitment to take care of each other."

-- Elsa Tucker

RECC Division administrative officer

HERSTORY

Shining a spotlight on our Women Veterans from Milwaukee



Photo by Gary Kunich

Elsa Tucker's military history is displayed on her office wall at the Milwaukee VA (above), but thoughts of her previous career aren't far away. At right, Tucker stands in formation during a change-of-command ceremony.

she said. "It helped that I was away from home for college, but then I got to come home on holidays. I remember inviting myself over to someone's house so they could watch me open up gifts at Christmas. It was lonely being away from everyone I knew."

That's why, she said, the soldiers are the part she will always remember.



Courtesy photo

"The traveling was nice, but that was secondary. Working in a postal unit, we were constantly working, 24 hours a day and the soldiers all became family. We did everything together. We did cookouts together, and holiday party after holiday party. It really made me understand what the military was all about."

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, she was promoted to

captain and moved to Fort Bragg, N.C., serving as the personnel officer for the 3rd Psychological Operations Battalion.

Already adept at the practice of "jumping out of perfectly good aircraft," she unknowingly shared this skill with one of her daughters — parachuting out of a plane while not yet realizing she was pregnant. Leading mostly male physical training formations in the already sweltering southern summer mornings while expecting her second child, and pushing her older daughter in a jogging stroller became routine. She continued to progress in her military career, becoming the company commander in the PSYOP Battalion, commanding a Headquarters Support Company of more than 100 soldiers who provided electronic maintenance, motor pool, personnel, logistic, operational and intelligence support to psychological operations worldwide.

"(The Army) taught me how quickly you can build a team, and really, a family with people who have a common goal, a passion to do what's right and a commitment to take care of each other," she said.

Her service at Fort Bragg also gave her skills which transferred into her growing family at home and would prepare her for future roles in civilian employment. For her last assignment, she was transferred back to her roots as personnel and operations officer for the Milwaukee Recruiting Battalion.

After nine and a half years of service, she transitioned to a non-military career, working in Human Resources at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

"I got out of the military, in part, because I had no experience outside the Army, and I wanted to know what that was like," she said.

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See HerStory

For some veterans, it may have been years since they lost loved ones, but staff reconnects with

A healing touch



Photo by Amanda Domaszek Urrea

For many veterans, the warmth of a gentle touch can be the best form of a medicine. It is especially useful for elderly patients and those living with Alzheimer's.

BY SUE GRESSER
Geriatric Clinical Nurse
Specialist

Benevolent Touch is a new program designed to bring the best care to our veterans.

Benevolent Touch is any positive tactile contact on another or one's own skin with loving intent. It was developed

originally at St. Ann Center in Milwaukee to help patients with Alzheimer's who may be challenged with anxiety and troubling behaviors such as wandering and aggression.

The theory behind Benevolent Touch is even though the mind deteriorates, the body often remembers.

Initial training for RECC staff began in June 2010 and four staff members were certified by the St. Ann Center earlier this year.

Instructors are Maxine McCain, and Brigid Riordan, both registered nurses; and Mattie Murry and Glenda Riggs, both restorative nursing assistants. They have developed and started an education program to get as many staff across the RECC Division trained to be able to utilize Benevolent Touch in their daily work with the veterans.

"I wanted to do this because I really believe in the concepts.

I see how a massage can help people feel, and help them with pain and anxiety," Riggs said. "For a lot of people here, they don't have family or loved ones anymore, and no one touches them in a loving way. They're touched all day long medically — we poke, prod and take blood, but what they need is that hug or friendly squeeze."

According to the program, some unstructured forms of Benevolent Touch are hand holding, a pat on the back, hugging, and sitting in someone's presence. The

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See Healing touch

"For many of us who work here, we really get to know the veterans, and it is personal."

-- Glenda Riggs
Restorative nursing assistant

HerStory

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"I got the same kind of leadership opportunities, but nothing could compare to the experiences in the military."

Flash forward to early 2009.

The bug to return to active-duty began to bite more forcefully. Due to family commitments, she determined the time wouldn't be quite right. She instead found a great compromise when she applied at the VA and was hired in RECC.

The rest, so they say, is "HerStory."

Though Tucker isn't sure her military career is completely over, for now she

appreciates that "in a very short period of time, I got to learn multiple and completely distinct career fields. I became very proficient, flexible and versatile in regards to my professional skills at a relatively young age."

And now, she said, that helps her share her knowledge with others at the VA.

"The military taught me how to build relationships, and that is very important for this job at the VA.

"In this position, you can work with anybody, and you have to learn where they are coming from before you attack an issue. That's especially important in RECC, where we are so diversified and people have different outlooks. My military experience has



Courtesy photo

Elsa Tucker, right, participates in a ceremonial sabre detail during a traditional Army wedding.

taught me how to pull a team together, and get everyone to work together to form a similar perspective."

Editor's note: HerStory is a recurring series in 5000 West that features stories of

women who have served in the Armed Forces. If you would like to nominate an employee or other veteran for HerStory, call Jill Feldman at 414-384-2000, ext. 41926, or Public Affairs at 414-382-5363.



Photo by Amanda Domaszek Urrea

Maxine McCain, a registered nurse, demonstrates a massage as part of the Benevolent Touch program with veteran Thomas Malone.

Healing touch

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structured types of Benevolent Touch that are included in the educational sessions are hand and foot massages, back massage, facial massage, shoulder massage and breathing and relaxation techniques.

"Personal space is very important, and you don't do anything inappropriate or anything that might appear that way," Riggs said. "You definitely let the veteran know what you are doing, and you get permission. The thing is, for many of us who work here, we really get to know the veterans, and it is personal."

Staff members are encouraged to incorporate Benevolent Touch into their daily assignments, such as giving a head massage during a bath and shampoo, sitting with a veteran and holding his or her hand, and providing relaxation through light touch to help an anxious or restless veteran calm down. The overall benefits to veterans include decreased anxiety, decreased pain, increased trust and relationship building, relaxation, better sleep, decreased agitation and restlessness, and enhanced energy and alertness.

The benefits for staff include improved therapeutic relationship building with the veteran and augmenting the care they already provide with strategies to enhance the veteran's comfort.

Riggs said she still tears up when she thinks about one veteran who had dementia and was being transferred to another community nursing home.

"I usually go with all the guys who get placed in the community, so they don't go alone," she said. "I want them to go with a familiar face. This guy was scared, and his eyes were really big. You could see he was worried. I reached over and held his hand the whole way there.

"He told me, 'You don't know how good it is to just have someone hold my hand. It's been a long time.' He died a week later, and I think I may have been the last person to give him that kind of comfort."



Photos by Brian Walker



PHOTOS (Clockwise from top left): The Marine Corp League's North Shore Detachment, re-enact the Iwo Jima flag raising with their living statue display; The VFW State Honor Guard marches in precision; and soldiers from the Wisconsin Army Reserves 548th Minimal Care Detachment, which includes VA employees Darcie Greuel, Matt Bell and Diane Mosey, were on hand for the parade.



Salute!

VA nurse thanks those who served with annual Milwaukee parade

BY GARY J. KUNICH
5000 West editor

MaryAnn D'Acquisto remembers what it's like to live in a third-world country under a dictator. Memories of her working for six weeks in a hospital in Kenya aren't far from her mind.

That's one of the reasons, she said, she got involved with organizing the annual Veterans Day parade in downtown Milwaukee.

"Back then Kenya was having a lot of riots because they wanted freedom. You could get arrested if you didn't have a picture of the president in your house or where you worked," she said. "Sometimes people don't appreciate the freedoms they have. When you can see how badly people want to live in a free society, it makes you appreciative for what you have. Since taking over the parade, and working here at the VA, I've heard so many stories, and met people who have experienced so much, who went through so much. How could we not do something like this to honor them?"

She talks about the one man on her parade committee who spent five years in a Vietnamese POW camp, and others who show her pictures of austere living conditions in war.

"You wonder how they were able to do that," she said. "If it wasn't for the military and the sacrifices they made, we



PHOTOS (Clockwise from top left): VA nurses from throughout the medical center make up a huge contingent during the parade. Company F of the 29th Colored Regiment, a historical re-enactment from the Civil War add a historical touch to the parade. Onlookers show their appreciation along the parade route.

wouldn't be able to live like this. They've given so much so we can be free."

D'Acquisto took over the parade in 2001 when she heard it would be canceled for lack of funds and support. With the parade taking place two months after 9/11, the streets were packed with more than 10,000 spectators showing their appreciation and patriotism.

"We just don't get that many anymore," she said with a frown. "People forget, or they don't care. But we have a lot of people who do care about making this happen."

D'Acquisto said it couldn't be done without a lot of help from

groups of volunteers from the VA. The VA nurses are also a big contingent at the event, with more than 50 turning out to show their colors, as they marched through the streets of downtown Milwaukee. They were one of about 150 military and veteran units who participated in the annual event.

D'Acquisto does all of the work in her off-duty hours.

"It's like anything else in your life," she said. "If it's important, and it's a priority, you just make time for it."

If you'd like to participate in next year's parade planning or help with donations, call D'Acquisto at 414-588-5472.

Jayne Johnston, OT lead, passes away unexpectedly

BY CHRISTA HOLLAND
5000 West copy editor

Jayne Johnston, an occupational therapy services supervisor at the Milwaukee VA, passed away unexpectedly Oct. 13.

She leaves a legacy of more than 20 years as a VA employee. Her role in OT also encompassed recreation therapy for the Community Living Centers.

She started her career as a trailblazer, graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's first Occupational Therapy class in 1976. Her new degree took her to a position as a mental health occupational therapist at St. Mary's Hill Psychiatric Hospital as well as to a coworker named Perry who would become her husband.

She returned to school and became a registered



Photo by Amanda Domaszek Urrea

Jayne Johnston

nurse in 1986, and began doing insurance audits for an HMO. She told coworkers that is when she discovered Occupational Therapy was her truest calling which led her to her career at the VA in 1990.

In 1993, she was promoted to lead occupational therapist and began work on what she felt was her greatest

professional accomplishment — building a stable, professional therapy staff.

Under her direction, services were expanded or created from what had previously been available to provide additional opportunities for our veterans.

Jayne began the Biofeedback Clinic which uses visual feedback to teach self-regulation skills in order to manage physiological signals that can lead to improved management of a variety of impairments. Through this offering alone, veterans are assisted in dealing with chronic pain, vascular disorders, neuromuscular disorders, sensory impairments and psychosocial impairments.

Everyone who knew Jayne will miss her matter-of-factness and willingness to ask difficult questions. She

was a human Rolodex with a mind for facts and details and could provide information in a seemingly superhuman manner and at an amazing speed. In her free time, she loved to spend time outdoors and up north with her husband. She was also a diehard Packer Backer and Brew Crew supporter.

Much can be said for her leadership when her staff used their lunch break as a forum to provide information for this article and shared their appreciation for her personal interest in their wellbeing — celebrating their accomplishments and providing a shoulder to lean on in difficult times.

They said she tried to deeply instill the lesson of sharing personal and departmental accomplishments stating simply, "If you don't let others know what you do, no one else will."

The torch of knowledge that she was in the midst of sharing will be greatly missed. Her achievements and influence will continue to burn brightly throughout our Medical Center.

Vets take time to say thanks ... to civilians

BY BRIAN WALKER
5000 West staff writer

Perhaps veteran Joe Weber said it best when he looked out on a crowd of civilians and said what many in his shoes were thinking: "It is not often expressed, but your services and contributions help us each day conquer our mountain. Thank you so much."

Weber was on hand at the Matousek Auditorium Nov. 14 as part of the first-ever Civilian Appreciation Day at the Milwaukee VA.

The idea for a civilian recognition day is the brainchild of the Mental Health Consumer Council, made up of veterans who use our VA for healthcare. They had an idea to publicly recognize civilians who made a positive difference in their lives — not just those in the VA, but in the

community.

Eileen Wilson, who works in Mental Health and helped organize the event, said it was intended to be a wonderful gesture to follow Veterans Day.

"This was a chance for veterans to show their appreciation to civilians who made an impact in their lives, because we don't always stop to think about them and thank them," she said.

But Wilson was surprised to find she was one of the recipients when World War II veteran David Brandt, whom she escorted to Washington, Photo D.C., for an Honor Flight, put her in for recognition.

"I did all that for him, but to see him there, and to get that, it made me cry," she said.

All told, veterans recognized 51 civilian employees in the VA for specific events.

One veteran thanked Marisa Straub, an art therapist, for giving him his dream.

Patti Schmidt, who works in Human Resources, reached out to fellow staff members for their support during two of



Photo by Brian Walker

Eileen Wilson gets a hug from World War II veteran David Brandt after he recognized her for being his escort during his Honor Flight to Washington, D.C.

her overseas deployments with the Army Reserves, while a community minister was thanked for setting up Milwaukee's first veteran food bank.

Officials said the first-year event was well received and they hope to make it even bigger next year.



Submitted photo

Although he said he tripped and fell out of the plane on this skydiving event, Drew DeWitt (center) didn't break any bones on this adventure. But he wasn't so lucky on about 40 other occasions.

Dossier

Drew DeWitt Acting Housekeeping Officer

Division: Facilities Management

Hometown: Lake Ronkonkoma, N.Y. and Gainesville, Fla.

Years of government service (plus any military time): Seven-plus.

What is your ideal job?: I am happy with the job I have. If I didn't enjoy working with the VA, I wouldn't continue to strive upward.

What is the coolest or strangest thing about your family?: My mother and uncle were born to an airman stationed in England, and an English citizen. When my grandparents returned to America they were told my uncle could enter but not my mother. For some reason, because of the timing involved, she was considered to be an illegal alien. It took an act of Congress for my mother to be allowed in to the United States. She still has a copy of the act and the hundreds of letters my grandparents received from people in

Canada offering to take my mother until she could gain entry.

If you could pick your own theme music, what would it be?: You can never go wrong with "Eye of the Tiger."

What are your favorite reads?: Probably my favorite book is called "White Coat: Becoming a Doctor at Harvard Medical School." It is an account of what one woman went through during her entire four years in medical school. I am also a fan of mystery stories and trying to figure them out before I reach the end.

What are your favorite TV shows?: "Scrubs," when it was on. I prefer comedies or sitcoms. I am big fan of "Psych," and "Big Bang Theory."

What TV show are you most embarrassed to admit you watch?: I am not embarrassed to admit any of them. I watch a lot of shows that other people might

be embarrassed to admit, but if I watch it, I have no problem letting people know.

What are your favorite movies?:

"Eddie and the Cruisers," and "Eddie and the Cruisers II: Eddie Lives."

What are you most likely to be searching for when you raid the fridge after midnight?: Diet Coke.

If you were on a reality television show, which would you want it to be and why?: "Fear Factor." I have always been a thrill seeker.

Favorite sports and teams?: Florida Gators and New York Jets for football, Yankees for baseball, and Knicks for basketball.

What are your hobbies?: I haven't had much time for hobbies lately, but when I lived in Florida I was always looking for the next thrill — skydiving, motorcycle racing, cliff diving — anything to get the adrenaline flowing is good in my book.

What's your favorite ethnic food?: Palaak Paneer or Chicken Pad Thai.



Photo by Gary Kunich

Drew DeWitt sits carefully at his desk without breaking any bones during the taking of this photo.

What is one thing most people don't know about you?: I've had nearly 40 broken bones in my life.

What is the best advice you have received?: Live life to the fullest because you can't take anything with you in the end.

Do you believe in ghosts?: Yes.

What is your worst habit?: Going to the casino.

Three things that can always be found in your refrigerator?: The only thing I ever have in my fridge is lots of Diet Coke.

Favorite pair of shoes?: I would wear flip flops year round if I could.

If you won \$20

million, what would you do with it?: I don't think that anyone could really answer that question. I think we all have ideas of what we would do with it but I am not sure that would actually happen if it was in our hands.

If you were stranded on a deserted island with just a boom box and three CDs, what would they be?: Do people still listen to CDs? I haven't purchased one of those in over 10 years.

If you were ever on an episode of "Cops," what role would you have in it?: The guy who called the cops to get people to quiet down so I can get some rest!

In Service

Congratulations to the following Zablocki employees who have reached career milestones in recent months:

40 YEARS

Victoria Gollish
John Heffner

35 YEARS

Barbara Conley
Thomas Franke
Michael Hartley
Eric Schneider

30 YEARS

Lisa Dane
Beth Ebright

Darcel Ehley
Michael McCoy
Debora McDaniel
Margie Paprocki
Mark Popoutsis

25 YEARS

Randall Asunto
Harvey Echols
Dawn Krueger
Timothy Letendre
Bernard Prouty

20 YEARS

Debra Bernhardt
Rhonda Briggs
Kelly Judkins
Gary Ramick
Darryl Smith
Judy Wickman

15 YEARS

Augustus Alexander
Susan Giulianetti
Johnny Hickman
Robert Martins
Dennis Thompson

10 YEARS

Deborah Ahlstrand
Sylvia Dolinski
Margaret Dowd
Michelle Handley
Julie Jacobs
Cheryl Maas
Rita Mingesz
Dieera Robinson
James Root
James Roth
TeShawn Stewart
John Weeden

Reporting Aboard

Phyllis Arrowood

Registered nurse

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Reading, movies, pets (especially cats), gardening, cooking and baking.

Why did you choose the VA?: I believe in and support our military and our veterans. My father was killed while in the military. Both of my children served. My son-in-law is a warrant officer and career Army.

First impressions: Friendly, comfortable, and encouraging. I am so happy to be here; this is not just a job, but a purpose! I am also happy that I can return the favor. Part of my education was subsidized by VA benefits because I was a war orphan.

Emily Allred

Nurse anesthetist

Hometown: Niagara, Wis.

Hobbies: Travel and family time.

Why did you choose the VA?: I feel honored to help provide the best care possible to our selfless veterans.

First impressions: I love it! Comfortable as home.

Kate Bartelak

Occupational therapist trainee

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Yoga, volleyball and hiking.

Why did you choose the VA?: Chance to give back to my country with an interesting population with a lot to offer.

First impressions: Very organized, structured and high standards.

Reggie Birt Jr.

Food service worker

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Reading, computers and working.

Why did you choose the VA?: Progress in life, new opportunities, more money and knowledge of the veterans.

First impressions: It is large and busy, and a frustrating building. I also feel the VA is a very helpful and relaxing home for the veterans. The VA, in my eyes, is a hospital with intentions to provide for and to serve our veterans.

Carlos Bonilla

Medical supply technician

Hometown: Cayey, Puerto Rico.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, 14 years.

Hobbies: Fishing, scuba diving, cooking and flying.

Why did you choose the VA?: To serve my fellow veterans.

Colleen Boyd

Licensed practical nurse

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Gardening and scrapbooking.

Why did you choose the VA?: I had a clinical experience here for nursing and really enjoyed it. In addition, I have many friends who work here. I would love nothing more than to serve our veterans.

First impressions: Everyone here is so very nice. It is a great atmosphere.

Antronette "Nikki" Brown

Nursing assistant

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Skating and singing.

Why did you choose the VA?: I have a couple family members who are vets, and I've always wanted to work in a hospital

setting.

First impressions: The hallways looked like the T.V. hospital shows. Very busy. Everyone was very helpful.

Amy Burgett

Licensed practical nurse

Hometown: West Bend, Wis.

Hobbies: Scrapbooking, spending time with my husband and two kids, outdoor activities and shopping.

Why did you choose the VA?: Everyone I have talked to really enjoys working at the VA, and I wanted to find a place that can be a career and not just a job.

First impressions: Everyone has been very friendly and seems to enjoy working at the VA.

Cody Carson

Psychology technician

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Running and traveling.

Why did you choose the VA?: The opportunity to work with those who have served our country.

First impressions: Great.

Christopher Cascio

Painter

Hometown: West Allis, Wis.

Prior military service: Navy, one year.

Why did you choose the VA?: Owning my own business in a down economy is not a very secure job, but at the VA, I have that security.

First impressions: The VA is a very caring organization.

Steven Crawley Sr.

Housekeeping aide

Hometown: Chicago, Ill.

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Reporting Aboard

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Prior military service: U.S. Army, three years.

Hobbies: Sports, reading and cooking.

Why did you choose the VA?: Every reason possible — good environment, good people and nice pay.

First impressions: I love it.

Joshua Dezek

Prosthetist

Hometown: I live in Pewaukee, but am originally from Rice Lake, Wis.

Hobbies: Hunting, fishing, hiking, and watching the Brewers and Packers.

Why did you choose the VA?: To serve vets like my brother and improve upon the care my father received.

First impressions: Welcoming — not only to the vets, but coworkers as well.

Amber DiGiorgio

Human resources specialist

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Prior military service: Air Force National Guard for 17 years and still serving.

Hobbies: Running.

Why did you choose the VA?: Serves a great purpose to help employ the veterans who served for my rights and freedom.

First impressions: Friendly and military-like.

Margaret Edelstein

Registered nurse

Hometown: Brookfield, Wis.

Hobbies: Cooking, reading and yard work.

Why did you choose the VA?: I believe in the mission — serving our veterans. The VA is renown for its quality initiatives and programs. I wanted to work with the national leader in quality.

First impressions: Very friendly and professional.

Sandra Enders

Registered nurse

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Sewing, reading, knitting, and making candles and lotions.

Why did you choose the VA?: Learning hospital with good pay and benefits. I love and appreciate our vets.

First impressions: It's huge! Michelle

Mezaros from Human Resources was wonderful and available. VA workers walking around have been very nice and helpful when I appeared lost!

Brian Evans

Housekeeping Aide

Hometown: Chicago, Ill.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, three years.

Hobbies: Reading.

Why did you choose the VA?: I want to work with vets.

First impressions: Interesting.

Ralph Fells

Housekeeping aide

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Chess.

Why did you choose the VA?: Job security.

First impressions: Very large organization.

Bruce Girga

Housekeeping aide

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, three years.

Hobbies: Motorcycles.

Why did you choose the VA?: Good place to work.

First impressions: Excellent.

Debbie Glime

Nurse practitioner

Hometown: Whitelaw, Wis.

Hobbies: Running, baking and reading.

Why did you choose the VA?: I heard very wonderful things about the VA and knew this would be a great chance to serve those who have served.

First impressions: Everyone has been so friendly!

Amanda Gollhardt

Social work fellow

Hometown: Sheboygan, Wis.

Hobbies: Painting, singing, spending time with friends and family, and working out.

Why did you choose the VA?: I can't think of a better place to begin my career as a social worker. I am confident I will learn so much here both professionally and personally.

First impressions: Everyone is so nice here. I feel like a part of the VA family already.

Brian Greatsinger

Pharmacy technician

Hometown: Racine, Wis.

Hobbies: Reading.

Why did you choose the VA?: I have friends who work here and my experience as a volunteer has been pleasant and rewarding.

First impressions: Very busy! A lot of friendly people work here.

Victoria Hoeft

Program specialist

Hometown: Jacksonville, N.C.

Hobbies: Genealogy, gardening and traveling.

Why did you choose the VA?: After working for the Medical College of Wisconsin for 13 years at the Zablocki VA, I chose to continue working at this great facility (as a VA employee).

First impressions: My first impression was that the services given here are greatly appreciated.

Joan Holmes

Readjustment counselor

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Working out.

Why did you choose the VA?: To help vets.

First impressions: Great!

Keith Iris Jr.

Social worker

Hometown: Stevens Point, Wis.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, seven years.

Hobbies: Harley riding.

Why did you choose the VA?: To continue the mission I started in Iraq.

First impressions: Great place to work.

Megan Janecko

Nursing assistant

Hometown: Hartland, Wis.

Hobbies: Cooking, biking, scrapbooking, reading and speaking Spanish.

Why did you choose the VA?: I did my clinicals here and was impressed with the facilities, staff and technology. I thought I would like to work here because of my positive experience.

First impressions: It has so much to offer patients, staff and the community, and I like the history.

Christopher Johnson

Radiation therapist

Hometown: Racine, Wis.

Hobbies: Staying active and watching or going to Brewers and Bucks games.

Why did you choose the VA?: I wanted to serve those who have sacrificed to serve

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me.

First impressions: Overwhelming at first, but I felt very welcomed.

Justin Katsma

Registered nurse

Hometown: Randolph, Wis.

Hobbies: Sports and outdoor activities with my family.

Why did you choose the VA?: For a chance to give back to the veterans.

First impressions: Everyone is smiling and says, "Hi."

Dustin "Lt. K." Kinzinger

Registered nurse

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Prior military service: U.S. Air Force, three years; and U.S. Army Reserves, three years. Still serving.

Hobbies: Photography, writing, art and construction.

Why did you choose the VA?: To serve soldiers and a potential to create a positive atmosphere on a large scale.

First impressions: I love the history of the old facility. There are motivated people who are committed.

Tammy LaDuron

Licensed practical nurse

Hometown: Crystal Falls, Mich.

Hobbies: Crafts, reading and computers.

Why did you choose the VA?: Personal growth and to serve veterans.

First impressions: Inviting, friendly staff and helpful.

Thomas Loman

Housekeeping aide

Hometown: Kalamazoo, Mich.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, two years.

Hobbies: Golf.

Why did you choose the VA?: I enjoy working with the veterans and helping out in any way I can.

First impressions: I'm really impressed with the family.

Ken Lewis Jr.

Medical supply technician

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Watching movies, shopping and listening to music.



Photo by Patricia Lynch

Strike up the band!

Evelyn Woolpert serves as Mistress of Ceremonies for the 1st Brigade Band concert for VA patients on Veterans Day 2011. The band uses its extensive collection of restored 19th-century brass instruments and original music books to portray the Civil War military band from Brodhead, Wis., a favorite of Gen. William Sherman. The hour-long concert included an 1860s version of the "Star-Spangled Banner," "Aura Lea" and "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp (the Prisoner's Hope)" and a demonstration by the West Side Victorian Dancers. The event was sponsored by Friends of Reclaiming Our Heritage and the West Side Soldiers Aid Society.

Why did you choose the VA?: Upgrade career, and respect for vets.

First impressions: Old building.

Richard Meeker

Registered nurse

Hometown: Kenosha, Wis.

Hobbies: Traveling, swimming and sightseeing new places.

Why did you choose the VA?: I wanted to better understand and be part of the Veterans Health Services system.

First impressions: Huge place with many services offered to those who served our country.

Don Mitchell

Painter

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Prior military service: U.S. Marine Corps, four years.

Hobbies: Hunting, fishing and football.

Why did you choose the VA?: As a vet, I always knew I would work here in one capacity or another. Vets deserve our respect and we should honor them!

First impressions: My first impression of the VA was as a patient. I was worried

about the horror stories about the care at VA hospitals. They were wrong!

Malvin Moten

Housekeeping aide

Prior military service: U.S. Navy, four years.

Hobbies: Swimming and archery.

First impressions: Very warm and willing to help, and directions are always given.

Andrea Olson

Occupational therapist trainee

Hometown: West Bend, Wis.

Hobbies: Cooking, hiking, quilting and music.

Why did you choose the VA?: One-of-a-kind learning experience.

Nicole Peressini

Licensed Practical Nurse

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Photography.

Why did you choose the VA?: I chose to work here because it is a training hospital and I am looking to further my education

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and career in the medical field.

First impressions: Very friendly and accommodating. Great place to work.\

Lina Poskocimas

Speech pathology trainee

Hometown: Homer Glen, Ill.

Hobbies: Traveling, reading and watching movies.

Why did you choose the VA?: The VA has a unique training program for student speech-language pathologists that allows me to explore many aspects of the medical setting.

First impressions: I have been at the VA for a week and met an amazing group of employees and patients that have welcomed me into their group.

Ryan Prouty

Pharmacist

Hometown: Freeman, S.D.

Hobbies: Sports, music and reading.

Why did you choose the VA?: I am passionate about caring for our veterans.

First impressions: Great system and friendly culture.

Jerome Pryor

Housekeeping aide

Hometown: Chicago, Ill.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, three years.

Hobbies: Fishing and baseball.

Why did you choose the VA?: I started working for the CWT program, and liked what I was doing in housekeeping.

First impressions: It's very clean, staff is very polite and courteous.

LaMonte Purifoy

Housekeeping aide

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, three years.

Hobbies: Fishing.

Why did you choose the VA?: To give back and help other vets.

First impressions: One of the premier hospitals in Milwaukee.

J. Lynette Purifoy

Human resources specialist

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Bike riding and kite flying.

Why did you choose the VA?: The VA is a stable employer with growth potential. The VA also provides the opportunity to serve veterans.

First impressions: The VA cares about all veterans, employees, patients and vets. The theory is a vet is a vet is a vet.

Peggy Robbins

Registered nurse

Hometown: Oshkosh, Wis.

Hobbies: Oil painting and cooking.

Why did you choose the VA?: I look forward to serving our veterans on the palliative unit.

First impressions: The staff is very friendly and the patients are very pleased with their care.

Nina Rodgers

Nursing assistant

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Cooking and skating.

Why did you choose the VA?: Needed a good place to work.

First impressions: I like it very much.

Santiago "Santi" Sanabria

Nursing assistant

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Bingo and dancing.

Why did you choose the VA?: It was my father's place for medical attention all his

life, and I've known quality people who work there. I've always wanted to work at the VA.

First impressions: Clean and a sense of quality. I can see that people care.

Sara Scheibe

Health technician

Hometown: Black Creek, Wis.

Hobbies: Riding our Harley-Davidson and kids' sporting events.

Why did you choose the VA?: Seems to be a great organization that truly does help those who need it.

First impressions: Amazing facility.

Drew Sievila

Registered nurse

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, still serving for seven-plus years with a deployment to Iraq.

Hobbies: Weightlifting, cooking, paintball and baseball.

Why did you choose the VA?: I am a veteran myself and appreciate the quality care I have received here. Now I want to return the favor to other veterans.

First impressions: Everyone is very

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Photo by Gary Kunich

A note of thanks

Wisconsin Lutheran High School students (from left to right) Josiah Ricke, Jonathan Melms and Michael Tomassetti, show off a huge banner they had signed by fellow students, teachers and family members, in honor of veterans. They dropped off the banner on Veterans Day. It now hangs in the main reception area of the Independence Hall Community Living Center.

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friendly.

Brian Stemper

Research biomedical engineer

Hometown: Fond Du Lac, Wis.

Hobbies: Golf.

Why did you choose the VA?: Research opportunities.

First impressions: Beautiful grounds.

Norman Suber

Food service worker

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, eight years.

Hobbies: Basketball, motorcycle riding, fishing, and spending time with family and friends.

Why did you choose the VA?: To continue working with veterans.

First impressions: Was not impressed in 2000, but 11 years later, I see change. I like what I see now.

Felicia Thomas

Nursing assistant

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Singing, writing poetry and reading my Bible.

Why did you choose the VA?: I always wanted to work in a hospital doing CNA work.

First impressions: It's a big hospital with

a lot of friendly people and different faces.

Sandy Wankowski

Dietetic technician

Hometown: Oconomowoc, Wis.

Hobbies: Reading, cooking and volunteering.

Why did you choose the VA?: A career at the VA is the best way I can currently serve my country and honor those who fought to keep us safe.

First impressions: Wow! What a friendly place. I'm going to like it here.

LeMonda Ward

Administrative support clerk

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Hobbies: Cooking, being with my daughter and traveling.

Why did you choose the VA?: My grandfather was a vet, and in his honor, I'm here to serve just as he would want.

First impressions: Very hospitable and friendly.

Jesse Wardinski

Food service worker

Hometown: West Allis, Wis.

Hobbies: Cars and billiards.

Why did you choose the VA?: Good job with good pay and good advancement opportunities. I volunteered at the Tomah VA when I was in military school.

First impressions: Big. **Arthur Wilkes** Human resources specialist

Hometown: None.

Prior military service: U.S. Army, 20 years.

Hobbies: Dog breeding, gardening and hiking.

Why did you choose the VA?: Change, and to improve veteran employment opportunities and assist veterans to increase federal employment potential.

Jennie Woreck

Social worker

Hometown: Appleton, Wis.

Hobbies: My husband and son, shopping, bowling, music and spending time with friends.

Why did you choose the VA?: To give back to those who have served.

First impressions: Fast-paced and professional.

Jodi Yenerall

Human resources specialist

Hometown: Milwaukee.

Prior military service: U.S. Air Force, 21 years.

Hobbies: Camping, shopping, and spending time with family.

Why did you choose the VA?: I moved back home to give back to my community. My grandfather and two uncles are veterans who also received healthcare at this VA hospital.

First impressions: Very positive atmosphere! Clean and professional.

VA Voices

Question: What is one luxury you absolutely cannot live without?



Kelly Judkins, management analyst: "My cell phone. I don't have anything on it but texting. It's what I use to keep in touch and keep track of my children."



Sarita Jones, program support assistant: "I can't do without my lipstick. It's the only make-up I wear and makes me feel nice. It's called 'Mood'."



Mick Larson, administrative fellow: "My DVR. This is the first time I got one, and I've been taping a lot of soccer games. All the games are in England, and they come on early in the morning."



Henry Spates, Canteen chief: "Conversation with my fellow man. You just cannot go without face-to-face interaction and communication. Not texting. Face-to-face. You can't beat that."